

DETROIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY



The Case for Preserving Detroit's Historical Museums

The Detroit Historical Society. The residents of this region recognized a need to formally protect their culture over 100 years ago when they formed the Detroit Historical Society. Since then, they have consistently supported the effort to preserve and display the region's history, ensuring that 300 years of their culture was not lost. The mission of the Detroit Historical Society is to tell Detroit's stories and why they matter. The Society advances its mission by 1) curating award-winning exhibitions that chronicle 300 years of the region's history at the Detroit Historical Museum, and exhibitions that explore Detroit's role in maritime history at the Dossin Great Lakes Museum; 2) by collecting, preserving, and sharing the City of Detroit's collection of nearly 300,000 historical artifacts; 3) by educating young people about Detroit's unique place in the past and their emerging role in its future; and 4) through community based programming and outreach that bring history into the community.

The Detroit Historical Society attracts over 150,000 visitors annually through the exhibits and programming offered at its two museums. Located in the city's cultural center, the Detroit Historical Museum features signature exhibits including Streets of Old Detroit; Detroit: Arsenal of Democracy; Doonvay to Freedom: Detroit and the Underground Railroad; America's Motor City; Origins: Life Where the River Bends, and others. Core exhibitions at the Dossin Great Lakes Museum located on the Detroit River front include the award-winning Built by the River; Outdoor Treasures featuring the bow anchor from the legendary S.S. Edmund Fitzgerald; and Miss Pepsi, the first hydroplane to qualify for a race at 100 mph.

The Society also opens 8-10 temporary exhibitions at the museums each year. Content in recent exhibitions explored the history of electronic music festivals in Detroit; the experience of Japanese Americans who came to Detroit after World War II; the city's brewing heritage; and legendary musician Mary Wilson. Boom Town, a temporary exhibition commemorating the Society's 100th Anniversary, was funded in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and examines Detroit's population explosion in the 1920's telling an intentionally inclusive story of twenty Detroiters in that era, including the migrants who came here from the deep South and immigrants who came from around the world. New exhibitions coming soon include Detroit's Diesels: A History of Detroit Diesel Corporation, Pistons Championships 20/35, and Detroit's Chinatowns.

THE DETROIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY'S AWARD-WINNING HISTORICAL MUSEUMS ARE WORTH PRESERVING. The Detroit Historical Society has worked for over 100 years to create museums that are recognized as some of America's very best. Its Detroit67

5401 Woodward

21st Place in the world for its inclusive

project won every major museum award in the country and took

Detroit, MI 48202 and insightful telling of the 1967 uprising in Detroit. More recently, thousands of metro-Detroiters flocked to the Detroit Historical Museum to remember Hudson's during the holidays. This is the kind of

Project 313.833.1805 engaging, insightful and personally meaningful programming that is so important to the region. Nearly 30,000 school children each year benefit from educational programming at the Society's museums,

Phone 313.833.5342 further, 150,000 people visit the museums each year.
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WITH THAT MUCH SUPPORT, COULD THE MUSEUMS ACTUALLY CLOSE? Unfortunately, yes. It has never been easy to fund the preservation of our history — but it has always been a priority for the region. Nevertheless, 20 years of reduced governmental support and shifting needs have decimated the Detroit Historical Society's budget and we are running out of reserves. We are presently funded at less than 50% of the equivalent level of 1991. Unlike some other museums in the region, we are not endowed. Our museums are large and old and require substantial funds just to maintain and staff so that they can remain safely open for visitors. We've cut operations and staffing to the bone, defened maintenance where possible, and delayed major exhibition updates. Notwithstanding these expense saving efforts, we are on a trajectory to be out of reserves within a decade. There is a real risk that a child born today may not get to enjoy his third-grade field trip to the Detroit Historical Museum.

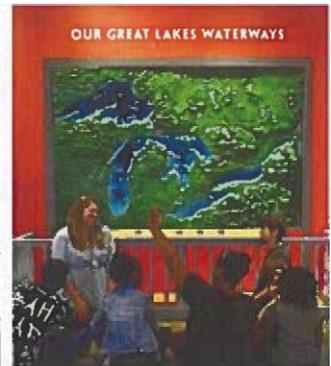
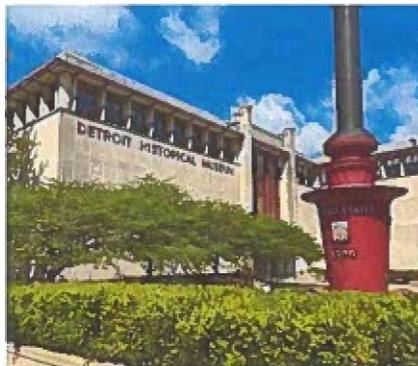
BUDGET HISTORY. The Detroit Historical Society is 100 years old. We know from researching our own history that funding has frequently been less than ideal. Still, we have reached an unprecedented moment; funding is inadequate and its steady downward trajectory has lasted for so long that the future of this 100 year old institution is no longer certain. In fact, at the present rate it could close in just a handful of years.

In 1991 the budget of the Detroit Historical Museum, then a City department, was \$4.7M. in today's dollars that would be \$9.5M. Our FY24 budget, for two museums and the collection, is still \$4.7M. In simple terms that means that in just 20 years our capacity to effectively tell the region's stories and preserve its history has been cut in half.

Certainly, there have been bright spots. From 2009-2014 we raised \$21 M (just over \$4M per year) and were able to update exhibits in both museums and build an unrestricted reserve fund that has helped us out of many tight spots. In 2016-2018 we raised \$4.4M to stage the award-winning Detroit67 project and another \$2.4M to enhance the landscape at the Dossin Great Lakes Museum. But overall the trajectory has been steadily downward and even those bright moments could not keep pace with the steady shift of governmental and philanthropic funding away from cultural institutions. The effect of the global pandemic magnified and accelerated this downward spiral and finally, in our Centennial year, The Detroit Historical Society, with its aging infrastructure, award winning staff and exhibitions and less than half the capacity it once had, recognized that it had no other choice but to approach the public with a case in support of the urgent need to protect culture.

5401 Woodward
Detroit, MI 48202

P 313.833.1805 F
313.833.5342



detroithistorical.o
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